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ABSTRACT

This report outlines the extent of the problem of adolescent suicide in the United States, noting that suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents in this country and that the rate of suicide by adolescents is expected to continue to increase in the future. It examines one adolescent suicide, using the case study method, to illustrate the problem. Definitions of suicide and of adolescence are presented and factors related to adolescent suicide are reviewed. The remainder of the paper discusses the case study of a teenager who hanged himself a few days before his 18th birthday. Poems written by the boy are included throughout the text and are used to illustrate how he passed through the stages of haplessness, helplessness, and hopelessness. Messages contained in the boy's writings are used to explain how suicide was selected as a solution to his perceived and actual problems. (NB)

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SONGS OF DESPAIR: A CASE STUDY OF ADOLESCENT SUICIDE

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SONGS OF DESPAIR: A CASE STUDY OF ADOLESCENT SUICIDE

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States (U.S. Monthly Vital Statistics, 1982). In 1982 over 5,000 young people killed themselves and uncounted others attempted suicide (U.S. Monthly Vital Statistics, 1984). Estimates of the number of attempts for each completed suicide range from 50-60 (McIntire, 1977) to 100 or more (Barry, 1986). In the age group 15-19 years, the numbers of suicides and the rates have more than quadrupled in the past three decades. By 1982, the rate was estimated at 12.0 suicides per 100,000 population (U.S. Monthly Vital Statistics, 1984). These rates, of course, include only those adolescent deaths that are reported as suicides. Frederick (1985) suggests that many such suicides are disguised or are reported as accidental deaths.

Unfortunately, the rate of suicide by adolescents may be expected to continue to increase in the future (Murphy and Wetzel, 1980; Solomon and Hellon, 1980). Holinger and Offer (1980) suggest that suicide rates are closely related to population composition and changes and state that suicides will drop as the percentage of adolescents decreases in the overall population. However, Frederick (1985) argues that adolescent suicide rates will continue to climb through at least

2005. Regardless of the future rates, adolescent suicide is a major social problem today.

Among adolescents, males have a completed suicide rate nearly nearly three times that of females, while females make unsuccessful suicide attempts at a rate up to three times that of males (Frederick, 1985). Adolescent suicide is more likely to occur in the late afternoon and early evening hours while adult suicides are more likely to occur in the morning hours (Tuckman and Connon, 1962). Jacobziner (1960) reported that adolescents are more likely to commit suicide in the spring of the year. White adolescents have a much higher suicide rate than any other races (Frederick, 1985).

Clearly, adolescent suicide is a major social problem in the United States. Our society cannot accept the loss of more than 5,000 young people each year to suicide. From 1970 to 1980, a total of nearly 50,000 young people died by their own hand; a total loss that is close to the number of Americans who died in the Vietnam War. All of the social institutions, including the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems, must learn to recognize and react to those behaviors which precede, and in many cases, predict the subsequent suicide. In this paper, one adolescent suicide is examined, using the case study method, in the hope that some understanding of this national tragedy may be gained.

Definition of Terms:

Before reviewing the research literature on adolescent suicide, it is useful to examine definitions that help delineate the problem. For purposes of this paper, Shneidman's (1985) definition of suicide will be used:

> Currently, in the Western world, suicide is a conscious act of self-induced annihilation, best understood as a multidimensional malaise in a needful individual who defines an issue for which the suicide is perceived as the best solution (p.203).

Key terms in Shneidman's definition are relevant to this study. The act of suicide is "a conscious act" implying a full understanding of the finality of the behavior. When Shneidman refers to suicide as "a multidimensional malaise," he recognizes the complexity of the problem. Suicide as "the best solution" is demonstrated in the case under study.

Another term requiring definition is "adolescence." Adolescence is a period of major adjustments and changes in the life cycle of every person. It represents a bridge between the relatively carefree dependency of childhood and the varied complexities of an independent adulthood.

> It is the time when the child begins to solidify an identity outside the context of familial relationships and the time when mastery over the environment increases significantly. The role changes associated with adolescence are stressful for any family....(Heillig, 1983, p.125)

Heillig(1983) points out that adolescence is problematic for the family as well as for the individual. The changes in family roles as the child begins to develop an independent existence are frequent sources of conflict and stress in even the most stable of families. Ross (1985) notes:

> Adolescence is also a period of transition between childhood and adulthood. To become an adult, the child must "put away childish things." He must give up his dependence and become an autonomously functioning individual; he must search for his identity and also for the path that will allow him to express that identity through relationships and career. These are the historical tasks for adolescence, but today's teenagers must accomplish this while their world is shaken by social tremors which seriously strain their traditional support systems. The families of these teenagers are likely to be extended, not by grandparents or aunts and uncles, but by divorce and remarriage. Those who traditionally offered him support, guidance, and experience are likely -- in these "reconstituted" families -- to be distracted from his needs by the dilemmas arising from their own changing roles and relationships (p. 149).

In this study, adolescence is viewed similarly to the concepts used by Ross (1985) and Heillig (1983). The concepts of separation of the child and the development of an individual personality as a critical part of adolescence are central to the discussion of this case. Since suicide is a multidimensional behavior, it is fitting that some of those varying dimensions and factors related to adolescent suicide be reviewed.

Factors Related to Adolescent Suicide:

For most young people, adolescence is a stressful, yet manageable, period of changes and adjustments. For others, it is seemingly impossible to manage. It is this latter group that is likely to become a suicide statistic. There are many factors associated or related to adolescent suicide. Norman L. Farberon (1985) summarizes many of the interrelated factors in adolescent suicide (p. 196). He identifies family, individual, and cultural factors as "antecedent and current" conditions and adds causal constructs of deviant behavior, performance problems and negative personal relationships as significant to the problem.

Shafii *et al* (1985) performed psychological autopsies following adolescent suicides and noted that parental/family pathology, antisocial behaviors, previous suicidal behavior, and drug and alcohol abuse were significant factors in adolescent suicides in their study. Both Jacobs (1971) and Cosand, *et al* (1982) note that suicides by adolescents are not sudden occurrences but rather are preceded by maladaptive behaviors and incidents, not only by the individual adolescent, but also involving family and other social institutions of which they are a part.

Heiden (1985) presents other factors involved in suicide and suicidal adolescents:

> Among suicidal young people in high school, provocative and defiant behavior towards parents, delinquency, drug abuse, and little interest in school are common. These youngsters seem to be seeking experience, even if it often of a self-destructive nature....

> These youngsters seem sociable rather than withdrawn. They need to be around other people and are often uncomfortable if they have to spend time alone. Yet, their social contacts are shallow; they become quite uneasy at the possibility of intimacy (p. 25).

It is evident that adolescent suicide is indeed "multidimensional;" however, there are a number of individual or unidimensional factors that have been shown to have a relationship with adolescent suicide. One of the more stressful aspects of adolescence is the struggle for independence as the youth tries to break his /her dependence upon parents and family. Finch and Poznanski (1971) discuss, in detail, how the " struggle for independence" often becomes a struggle for survival and existence itself. When that struggle appears to the youth to be lost, suicide is often perceived as the only available option.

Another factor associated with the changes and developmental aspects of adolescence is that of emerging sexuality. A number of studies (Mason, 1954; Schneer, et al, 1961; and Miller, 1975, among others) have suggested that physical changes associated with puberty and emotional concerns about sexuality are critical factors in some adolescent suicides. Questions of sexual identity and sexual competence are foremost in the factors related to suicide among adolescents.

Problems in school are also associated with adolescent suicide (Rosenberg and Latimer, 1966; Teicher and Jacobs, 1966; Schneer and Kay, 1961; Ross, 1985; and Berkovitz, 1985). School underachievers and dropouts are disproportionally represented among suicidal adolescents. Failure to achieve in school and

abandonment of all educational endeavors may represent just one more in a series of failures for the suicidal youth.

Family pathology of all types has been shown to be related to suicide of adolescents (Toolan, 1962; Dorpat, *et al*, 1965; Barter, *et al*, 1968; Jacobziner, 1965; Jacobs and Teicher, 1967; Shaffer, 1974; Carlson and Cantwell, 1982; Grafinkel, *et al*, 1982; Tishler and McKenry, 1982; Heiden, 1985; Wright, 1985; Pfeffer, 1986). Family stress, divorce, remarriage, alienation, and family member psychopathology are among the many factors included in these studies as part of family pathology.

Another factor identified as related to adolescent suicide results from the receipt by the youth of hostile and aggressive communications from "significant others" in his/her life (Heillig, 1983). Others have studied hostile communications and have identified a variety of levels of hostility and aggressiveness ranging from degradation to stated death wishes directed at the youth (Schrut, 1964; Rosenberg and Latimer, 1966; Rosenberg, 197; Sabbath, 1971).

Suicidal ideas, communications and attempts are often discussed in the literature as "cries for help" (Richman, 1979; Molin, 1986). When the adolescent feels that lines of communication with peers, parents, and family are closed, suicidal behavior seems to offer a means of getting attention, a means of opening lines of communication. Any suicidal behavior is a serious signal that requires immediate attention (Pfeffer, *et al*, 1979; Shafii, 1985; Berkovitz, 1985).

Depression is frequently associated with suicide at all age levels. It has been identified as a major contributing factor in adolescent suicide (Shaffer, 1974; Carlson and Cantwell, 1982; Emery, 1983; Siegal and Griffin, 1983; Robbins and Alessi, 1985; Gispert, *et al*, 1985; Pfeffer, 1986). Closely related to depression is the presence of prior psychiatric care among completed adolescent suicides (Shaffer, 1974; Pfeffer, *et al*, 1979; Cosand, *et al*, 1982; Pfeffer, 1986). The need for psychiatric care may be viewed by the youth as a type of final validation of feelings of inadequacy and helplessness.

Frederick (1985) discusses the "three H's" that often appear in suicidal persons:

> Such people may display a *hapless* quality; i.e. initially, they experience a series of bad breaks, and the cards seem to be stacked against them in their own minds. Actually, a series of events may have occurred so that such feelings have basis in reality. Following this phenomenon, the individual frequently tends to feel *helpless* and does not possess the inner or outer resources to deal with the feeling of frustration and haplessness. Social support systems from outside the self are missing or inadequate, and inner psychological resources are so weakened or impaired that they cannot assist the individual in a state of crisis and stress. Feelings of *hopelessness* ensue, and when all three of these occur in some early direct sequence, a state of affairs exists which is cause for serious concern with respect to potential suicide (p. 15).

In the discussion below, the haplessness, helplessness, and, ultimately, hopelessness of one young man are seen.

Background of the Case:

Kenny J. (not his real name) died by hanging himself in the basement of his home during the late afternoon hours a few days before his 18th birthday. Kenny was the oldest child and only son in a family that included a twelve year old sister, a two year old half-sister, his natural mother and a stepfather. Kenny's natural father and mother were divorced when Kenny was nearly seven years of age. His mother remarried some six years after the divorce. Kenny and his sister were subsequently adopted by the stepfather. The youngest child was born two years after the remarriage of Kenny's mother. Kenny had almost no contact with his natural father following the divorce and no known contacts at all for at least four years before Kenny's suicide.

From birth until age 14, Kenny lived in a small city on the Gulf of Mexico in Florida. When Kenny's stepfather was transferred, the family moved to a small Midwestern town. All of Kenny's friends and members of the extended family were left behind in Florida. The years in Florida gave no hints of the tragedy to come. Kenny was an average student who was popular with teachers and peers and who participated in a variety of school activities. He was close to an uncle, his father's brother, who became almost a surrogate father for Kenny until Kenny's mother remarried. Kenny had a girlfriend who continued to write to him after the move to the Midwest.

Kenny resisted the move and sought to stay in Florida with his uncle or with friends. His uncle, however, ultimately refused to allow Kenny to live with him although the uncle had first suggested the possibility. As a result, Kenny felt that his uncle had deliberately deceived him.

Kenny's resentment of the relocation was soon followed by a series of problems. His girlfriend was supposed to move to the same area but her father took a transfer to another location instead of moving to the Midwest. Kenny, accustomed to being an insider, found himself an outsider in the new school and neighborhood. Different weather, hobbies, life styles, and schools created problems that Kenny tried to solve. He tried to adapt by going to extremes to try to fit in with his peers. His attempts were largely unsuccessful and met with rejection and humiliation. Kenny's grades dropped; he began to skip classes and after one year, at the age of 16, simply quit going to school. His mother supported Kenny's decision to drop out of school while his stepfather made it a major issue within the family and his relationship with Kenny.

Problems at home were also stressful; Kenny's mother and sister also disliked life at the new location. Family and parental arguments and conflict became commonplace occurrences. Kenny became increasingly alienated from his stepfather and from most of his peers. He began to use drugs, starting with marijuana, and soon progressed to LSD and amphetamines. His only associates outside the home were others involved in the local drug scene. He paid for most of

the drugs he used by making deliveries or minor sales for drug dealers. He also became emotionally and sexually involved with a divorcee, several years older than he, and began a relationship that proved to be another source of stress in his life.

Throughout the period from the move to the Midwest until his suicide, Kenny wrote poems and songs about his life and his feelings. Those writings illustrate the path from life to death that Kenny followed.

The Struggle for Independence:

Kenny was very close to his mother. She referred to him as her "baby" and was extremely protective of Kenny. She permitted Kenny to do little for himself and tended to defend him and justify his behavior. She refused to admit that Kenny had any "real problems." Kenny recognized the influence that his mother had in his life:

"He was just a small town boy,
Mama raised him shy and coy."

Kenny's close relationship with his mother created a lot of ambivalence. Kenny wanted and needed her protection. However, his desire for closeness and his needs for independence conflicted:

"She did her best to keep me under her feet
But now I've grown up and I'll take to the street."

In a poem, titled "Dear Mom," Kenny wrote:

"I've got a lot on my mind,
I'm a troubled man.
I've got thoughts of my own
That only I understand.
If you don't understand that,
You'll never understand me.
But don't look down on the kid
For he loves you
And we'll always be one
For that's better than two."

Kenny also felt different from others, seeing himself as more creative and understanding. He felt that his life was a struggle for expression and recognition of his individuality. His feelings of being different were rationalized so that others were at fault and not as capable as he.

"He was an artist born and bred
It was in his blood and deep in his head.
When others understand a verse,
He understands a warped message behind the verse.
Yes, he will struggle all through his life."

He had a deep desire for recognition and appreciation. He described himself as "a loner," a "loser," a "real wimp," and sought solace from his feelings of inferiority in his creativity and the recognition he felt would eventually come:

"I'm a man of today,
The past is no good.
So I'll just disappear
Cause I'm not understood.
Maybe tomorrow my talent will be seen,
Until then I'll disappear
And find some place to lean."

As an aspect of his artistic expression, Kenny expressed much concern for the spiritual, directed not toward the understanding of a higher power but as an alternative existence to the physical world. His songs reflected his questioning of his faith:

"Is there really a God?
Or is God just the result of a far out trip?"

"Eternal life is what they preach
Of a destiny impossible to reach.
We are just play pieces
In a full-scale game of an unknown God."

"For God did not destroy man
Man destroyed God,
And Lucifer walks the land
'Cause curiousity got the best of man."

"For once the soul has left this world
There is only eternal philosophy."

Kenny's philosophy was primarily an attempt at a means for the expression of his individuality. However, Kenny's individuality was expressed more as a spiritual self rather than as a physical self. Kenny's concerns about his problems were never expressed in physical terms but rather in spiritual or philosophical terms. For Kenny, drugs became a means to express this spiritual life that was philosophical in nature. Drugs offered a way to escape the everyday physical life and to enter the mystical world of the spiritual and philosophical.

Drugs and Chemicals:

Drugs and the effects of drugs are themes that reoccur throughout Kenny's writings:

"The whole place is Blotter,
Let's drop the damn thing down.
By the time we walk C.I.D. passage
We will never hit the ground."

"He had a piece of paper.
He dropped it in his mouth.
Then the walls started moving,
His stereo melted down.

But the music just got louder,
And he fell on the ground.
His brain started frying,
He lost all control."

In many of his writings, Kenny recognized the danger of abusing drugs but he seemed to find them irresistible:

"Expand your mind
Comprehend new worlds
Understand the strange
Become the deranged.
Drop it on down
Now fry your brain."

"Psychoodelic state
breathing walls
narrowing halls
snakes on floor
you're tripping galore
Psychodelic state"

"Trippin' in the bedroom
Trippin' on the street
All those different blotters
How I love to drop 'em down.

My soul has left my body
Now I'm flying through the sky.
I'm in a different world now,
I'm on an acid high."

For Kenny, drugs became an escape and a way to confirm, to himself, his own uniqueness and value. In addition, Kenny felt that those who did not use drugs were somehow limited and missing something of value:

"I have thought
That you'll never know
I can travel places
That you'll never go.

I can comprehend
What you can't explain.
Now leave me alone
So I can expand my brain."

The use of drugs led Kenny down to despair and, ultimately, to suicide and the end of his life. Increasingly, Kenny's writings reflected his depression and his despair. He expressed his view of life as hopeless. He blamed society and his parents for failing to prepare him for life. Society and his parents took away from him all that he cared for and loved. He blamed others for his troubles and blamed society for conducting mindless experiments upon the children of the world. In addition, Kenny expressed a view of predestination:

"We all have a destiny, good or bad,
We must take the ride.
Life is like a record, a pre-programmed path,
Sometimes we get stuck in a groove
But with a sudden jump, like a long vacation,
We escape reality but we return back to
The same old stuck up groove."

"Pure and innocent, into this world we came,
But time will make us never the same.
White as snow, our minds were clear,
But life is not really what it seems
Blinded by our innocence
The truth was never in existence."

Kenny first expressed his suicidal thoughts in a poem that talks of losing the desire to live:

"I lost my will to live
When I was seventeen.
It seemed that life was cruel
And this world we live in mean.
So I partied my life away
Looking for a brighter day
But the rain just kept falling
on my head."

In a poem titled *"The Blade"*, Kenny began to see suicide as an answer to problems and as a macho behavior. After reading this poem, one wonders how many times he may have cut as he does figuratively in the poem. The autopsy report noted a complete absence of any scars anywhere on the body. Apparently Kenny thought often of the blade as a means of suicide but never acted on the idea:

"Your mama is yelling.
And your daddy calls your name.
Open open up the top drawer
And get out your razor blade.
When the pressure grows intense
And you think you are insane,
Go ahead and cut now, slash another vein.

Feeling the walls of life,
Closing in around me,
And it's gonna be one of those days,
Going out to face the cold world
And coming home to the blade.

Icy the cold steel against my skin,
See the trail of red left behind,
But the hurt is out and my ego grows,
For those of us who cut,
It's the only release that we know,
Self destruction is my escape.

But the scars make me feel macho,
And I can forget the hurt that I've grown to know.
Call it sadistic, call it what you will,
I've grown to find release with my blade of steel."

Kenny wrote a suicide note to his mother and one to his sister before his suicide. To his mother he expressed his love and his forgiveness for all that had been done to him. He reassured her that *"we'll be together again but it just takes time."* He wrote to his younger sister in these words:

"Don't believe what you hear, believe what you know,
For your love adds to the deepness of my soul.
There comes a time when one must do
What one knows he has to do.
I want you to know I'm leaving them, not you."

Summary:

Kenny's poems offer a rare view into the thought processes and the emotions of an adolescent as he goes through the stages of haplessness, to helplessness, to the finality of hopelessness. The messages contained in these writings by a young man who took his own life offer much to our understanding of how suicide is selected as a solution to the perceived and actual problems. Certainly, one message is clear: adolescents who turn to drugs and other self-destructive behavior need, and deserve, all of the help that our society can provide.

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